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THE URBAN NEGRO IN PENNSYLVANIA:

A Summary of the Findings and Recommendations of the Pennsylvania State Temporary Commission on the Conditions of the Urban Colored Population

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Foreword

Even those who have numerous facts at hand about the stream of urban Negro life in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania have much to gain from a careful study of the Final Report of the Pennsylvania State Temporary Commission on the Conditions of the Urban Colored Population[1] to the General Assembly, January 1943. Against a background of positive accomplishment by Negroes in Pennsylvania, chiefly through brief biographical references which are a direct challenge to the present Negro leadership in this State, major social problems are presented and recommendations for improving them, set forth.

In the review of this significant report it is well to have a frame of reference within which to study and interpret its findings and recommendations. The principal concern of the Commission survey is a study of certain social problems. What, we may ask ourselves at this point, is a social problem. Dr. James H. S. Bossard[2] defines a social problem as a social situation (1) which is a product of group life, (2) which involves a substantial number of persons, (3) which constitutes a threat to social well-being, (4) as defined by the mores of the group, and (5) which must be dealt with in an organized and concerted way.

Further, he emphasizes the necessity for taking into consideration the "specificity of social problems"[3]—specificity as to place, which means simply a localized approach, specificity as to time, inasmuch as problems made the object of social concern vary from time to time, and specificity as to the combination of factors which produce them, or the accepted fact of multiple causation.

The Commission report is by no means exhaustive. That is, it does not attempt to encompass all the social problems known to urban Negro life in Pennsylvania. The Commission selected for study in 20 cities the following major social problems: housing, health, recreation, employment, crime and delinquency, education, and, finally interracial contacts and civil rights.

Studies in these areas of Negro life were made by the research staff of the Commission, assisted by 21 volunteer workers. Cooperative research projects were also conducted by the staff and some professors and students of several of the higher institutions of learning in the State. In addition, 63 persons of state and national importance prepared special statements, studies and exhibits for the Commission.

The recommendations of the Commission, primarily legislative because they were addressed to the General Assembly, point the way, nevertheless, to intelligent planning and effective social action.

Estella H. Scott.

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[1] The Commission was created by an Act of the General Assembly, approved by the Governor in June 1939. Mr. E. Washington Rhodes, Chairman of the Commission, introduced the bill into the legislature. Dr. Laurence Foster, Executive Director of the Commission, had major responsibility for the direction of the study.

[2] Bossard, James H. S., *Social Change and Social Problems*, New York: Harper and Brothers, Rev. Ed., 1938 c., pp. 3.

[3] *Idem*, pp. 44-58.

Findings of the Commission Survey

Before the Commission findings are presented in part, may we take a more patient view toward the statistics which will be cited to describe objectively the incidence of these social problems among the urban Negro population of Pennsylvania. Instead of labelling these figures as "dry" and "uninteresting", as is so frequently done, let us think of them as numerical expressions of what *people* have done or are doing, of the varying conditions of *people*, in health, income, etc.; or the number of *people* living at a certain time in a certain place, and so on. These figures, we must remember, get the essence of their meaning from life itself in all of its ramifications. Thus, if the percentages of urban-rural dispersion are discussed, they will indicate the movements of people and the places where they now live. Similarly, if mortality rates are cited, they will tell a story of the number of people who have died in relation to every 1000 persons in the population. These statistics, then, are but convenient tools for summarizing and comparing facts about *people* in different places and at different times.

Population

It is important, first, to have within our purview the most meaningful facts about population changes among Negroes in Pennsylvania as a backdrop against which to project the Commission findings. At least four such facts reveal themselves:

1. Negroes have constituted an increasing proportion of the population

Population Ratio of Negroes in Pa.: 1880-1940

1880 — 2%
1920 — 3.3%
1930 — 4.5%
1940 — 4.74%

2. More impressive is the percentage of increase of Negroes in relation to the increase among white people. The latest decade covering this information that was cited in the report is 1920-1930, during which the white population increased 9% and the Negro population increased 51%. From agency reports, etc., it has been found that there has been a considerable influx of Negroes, especially into urban centers, during the present conflict.

3. There has been an exceedingly high concentration of Negroes in non-farm areas. For example, in 1910, almost 99% of the Negroes in Pennsylvania lived in non-farm areas.

4. The Negro population in Pennsylvania has been highly "migrant." In 1930, for instance, 65% of them were born in other states, and approximately 94% of this group of out-of-state Negroes were born in the South. Moreover, frequently they came from a rural to an urban industrial area, which inevitably created serious problems of adjustment.

Housing

Location of Dwellings

1. A pattern of residential segregation persists throughout the State, with its resulant "artificial" housing scarcity among Negroes.
2. Negro dwellings, in significant numbers, are still situated in "areas of transition", or slum areas.

Conditions of Dwellings

1. Approximately three-fourths of all Negro-occupied dwellings were found to be sub-standard.

   There were, of course, local variations. In Erie, for example, 44% of all Negro-occupied units were sub-standard. In Harrisburg, 72%; 69% in Philadelphia; a little over 94% in Reading, and so on.

Tenancy and Home Ownership

1. Eighty-five per cent of the Negroes in the State were tenants and paid higher rates in proportion to value received.
2. Although home ownership increased from 1900 to 1930, Negroes in Pennsylvania have not kept pace with Negro home ownership throughout the United States.

The housing problem among Negroes in Pennsylvania has been intensified by their high degree of urban concentration. Its seriousness raises a fundamental issue because housing is related to every major aspect of family life.

Health

Mortality Rates (All Causes)

1. There has been a remarkable decrease in the death rates of Pennsylvania Negroes during the last 50 years. Nevertheless, *they still exceed the national white and Negro death rates.*

Specific Types of Illness

1. Tuberculosis—in 1941 the Department of Health treated Negroes at about 3 times their ratio to the general population. Facilities for therapy are still quite inadequate.
2. Venereal Diseases—similarly, Negroes were treated for venereal diseases at the rate of approximately thirteen times their ratio in the total population.

Public Health Program

1. There was apparent an inadequacy of public health facilities for all citizens, and especially for the Negro.
2. Paradoxically, there was a concentration of public health nurses in small municipalities of 5,000 population and less, whereas Negroes are clustered, as we have mentioned above, in urban centers.

Recreation

1. "Because of restrictions and exclusions, poverty and related factors, qualitatively and quantitatively, there is a shortage of recreational facilities and services for Negroes."[1]

Crime and Delinquency

1. Negro delinquency and crime rates range from 2 to nearly 8 times their proportion in the general population.
2. *Taken per 100,000 population, the rate of law violations of Pennsylvania Negroes exceeds that of Negroes throughout the nation.*
3. In 1940 Negroes in Pennsylvania constituted over 26% of the total prison population in State penal institutions (4.7% of the population).
4. *Delinquency rates of Pennsylvania Negro children are higher than the national percentage for Negro children.*
5. An excessive number of recidivists, or repeaters, was apparent.

Employment

1. Negroes are disproportionately concentrated in the most unremunerative and insecure occupations.
2. The composition and utility of the Negro labor force are typical. There is restrictive occupational diffusion and upgrading is slow.
3. Negroes were characterized by employment marginality. Their rate of unemployment was in excess of that for the general population of the State.

Education

1. Since 1900, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of Negroes between the ages of 5 and 25 attending school.
2. In 1940, proportionately, there were 7 times as many Negroes as whites, 25 years and over, who had "no schooling".
3. An exclusive policy on the secondary level was in operation in some parts of the State.
4. The character of some textbooks with reference to racial groups was questioned.

Interracial Contacts and Civil Rights

1. As was indicated above, a pattern of physical and psychological residential segregation persists.
2. Many civil and political rights are denied the Negro.
3. Social distance, in many instances, seems to be greater.
4. Prevailing public opinion continues to adhere to "expensive, unjust and undemocratic caste system."

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[1] Commission Report, p. 324.

Recommendations of the Commission

Housing

1. A program of tenant education.
2. The increased development of public low-cost housing, as well as the coordination of public and private housing agencies.

Health

1. Legislation prohibiting discrimination in granting any and all types of insurance.
2. Withdrawal of tax-exemption and tax-aid from all health and medical agencies which discriminate against qualified persons.
3. Increase of tax funds to Negro-staffed hospitals.
4. Increased funds to the Department of Health to expand its program.
5. Additional medical centers provided by the State.

Recreation

1. Closer organic relation between formal education and organized recreation.
2. Legislation prohibiting discrimination on account of race, religion or national origin in the use of tax-supported recreational facilities.

Employment

1. The enactment of effective fair employment practice legislation.

Crime and Delinquency

1. Office of the Attorney General or some other agency be charged with the responsibility of studying "police brutality", "mass arrests", "cold storage" and "the third degree".
2. Improved facilities for rehabilitation program.
3. Department of Welfare or some other designated agency be charged with investigating the status of dependent and neglected children.

Education

1. Equitable number of qualified Negroes on faculties of public schools.
2. Revision of public school curriculum to include consumer education, increased adult education and intercultural education.
3. The practice in education of the democracy for which we are fighting.
4. Establishment by the Department of Public Instruction of pre-delinquent clinics, in which an extensive guidance program would be set up.
5. Legislation withdrawing from use any books and other teaching materials misrepresenting any racial, national, cultural or religious group.

1. Office of the Attorney General or some other agency be charged with the responsibility for investigating and receiving complaints regarding violations of the Civil Rights Law of the State.

2. Employment of Negroes in the various State Departments and their use on advisory boards, in Health, Labor and Industry, Public Assistance, Public Instruction, etc.

3. Further, that these Negroes should not necessarily be charged with "Negro Affairs", but rather with problems common to all citizens.

Members of the Commission

E. Washington Rhodes, Chairman

Franklin Spencer Edmonds, Member of the Senate, Vice-Chairman

R. Maurice Moss, Secretary

Homer S. Brown, House of Representatives

George B. Scarlett, Member of the Senate

A. Evans Kephart, Member of the Senate

Wayne L. Hopkins

Dr. Leslie Pinckney Hill

Mrs. Maude B. Coleman

Mrs. S. Willie Layten

Mark S. James

Mrs. Nellie Ha'Zell (deceased)

Reverend Marshall L. Shepard

Dr. George L. Winstead

Executive Staff of the Commission

Laurence Foster, *Executive Director*

Minnie E. Lee, Office Secretary